

Final Environmental Assessment



**Cree Crossing Wildlife Management Area
Haying Project**

March 2021

Final Environmental Assessment MEPA, NEPA, MCA 23-1-110 CHECKLIST

PART I. PROPOSED ACTION DESCRIPTION

1. Type of proposed state action: Grass and forb management on Cree Crossing Wildlife Management Area (WMA) through block haying, and the removal of hay bales.

2. Agency authority for the proposed action: MT FWP has authority under Section 87-1-210 MCA to protect, enhance, and regulate the use of Montana's fish and wildlife resources for public benefit now and in the future.

3. Anticipated Schedule:

Estimated **haying** Commencement Date: **July 2nd, 2021**
 Estimated Completion Date: **August 14th, 2021**

5. Location affected by proposed action (county, range and township – included map): Phillips County, Township 32 N Range 32 E Section 11 & 12. **Map is attached to end of this document.**

6. Project size -- estimate the number of acres that would be directly affected that are currently:

	<u>Acres</u>		<u>Acres</u>
(a) Developed:		(d) Floodplain	<u>0</u>
Residential	<u>0</u>		
Industrial	<u>0</u>	(e) Productive:	
(existing shop area)		Irrigated cropland	<u>0</u>
(b) Open Space/ Woodlands/Recreation	<u>0</u>	Dry cropland	<u>129</u>
(c) Wetlands/Riparian: Areas	<u>0</u>	Forestry	<u>0</u>
		Rangeland	<u>0</u>
		Other	<u>0</u>

8. Listing of any other Local, State or Federal agency that has overlapping or additional jurisdiction.

(a) Permits: N/A

(b) Funding:

There would be no agency or external funding required for this project. The agricultural lease will be awarded to the highest bidder through a sealed bid process.

(c) Other Overlapping or Additional Jurisdictional Responsibilities: N/A

9. Narrative summary of the proposed action: There are two previously farmed fields on Cree Crossing Wildlife Management Area, that shortly after purchase, FWP planted into DNC. Starting in 2009, approximately 89 acres were planted in a native (green needle, slender wheatgrass, western wheatgrass, thick spike wheatgrass, purple prairie clover, and yellow coneflower) and dense nesting cover (DNC; pubescent wheatgrass, slender wheatgrass, tall wheatgrass, basin wildrye, alfalfa, and yellow sweet clover) mixes on the westside of the WMA. In 2013 approximately 40 acres of previous cropped land was planted in DNC (slender wheatgrass, pubescent wheat grass, tall wheatgrass, basin wildrye, alfalfa, yellow sweet clover, Maximillian sunflower, Lewis flax) on the east side. Due to higher than average moisture years and relatively mild winters for the years of 2011-2016, the grasslands have grown considerably and are now extremely dense. FWP staff have noted throughout recent years that these fields have become almost impenetrable for nesting waterfowl and upland game birds due to the lack of grass maintenance and years of old, skeletal structure building up. Additionally, it has been observed that the alfalfa and clover have been getting choked out. The overall stand of vegetation may benefit from some active management to help improve overall vigor and composition of the vegetation and palatability to ungulates and other wildlife.

FWP proposes prescriptive haying of these two fields to occur after July 1st to account for grassland bird nesting and brood rearing seasons. Prescriptive haying will be conducted in a large block in each field that accounts for roughly 1/3 of the respective field's size. This means that of the 129 acres of DNC on the WMA we hope to remove roughly 33% (43 acres) while leaving the remaining 86 acres of DNC standing. This management activity may benefit the fields through; the removal of old, decadent vegetative structure that have built up over time, haying in blocks may provide areas that are traversable and open for foraging by broods and adult upland game birds, the hayed blocks may allow the forbs in the field to utilize any late season moisture and produce new regrowth, and the blocks may help as a catch for snow in the winter months to help with soil moisture levels for the following spring, and the removal of the old growth may provide more nesting areas the following spring as the hayed blocks are more accessible to ground nesting birds as the grasses and forbs regrow. FWP will work with the chosen lessee to determine what kind of equipment will be used and will then determine the exact location of the block to be hayed in each field to reduce any potential "sink" situation where there is too much edge effect and may increase predation.

In order to achieve this habitat management there will be an agricultural solicitation for the haying lease of the DNC fields with a sealed bid.

Following the initial project, FWP staff will evaluate the haying's effectiveness in rejuvenating the DNC fields and determine if a similar project will occur on the portions that were left standing in future years.

10. Description and analysis of reasonable alternatives:

Alternative A: No Action – If no action is taken, these fields will maintain their extremely dense nature providing limited nesting and brooding rearing areas and will continue to choke out certain vegetation species with years of old, residual growth. The

health and vigor of the stand may decrease and palatability of the vegetation for ungulates may decrease.

Alternative B: Proposed Action – Remove approximately 33% of old, decadent grass as well as the current year’s growth to rejuvenate stand.

PART II. ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW CHECKLIST

1. Evaluation of the impacts of the Proposed Action including secondary and cumulative impacts on the Physical and Human Environment.

A. PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

1. <u>LAND RESOURCES</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Soil instability or changes in geologic substructure?		X				
b. Disruption, displacement, erosion, compaction, moisture loss, or over-covering of soil, which would reduce productivity or fertility?			X		YES	1b
c. Destruction, covering or modification of any unique geologic or physical features?		X				
d. Changes in siltation, deposition or erosion patterns that may modify the channel of a river or stream or the bed or shore of a lake?		X				
e. Exposure of people or property to earthquakes, landslides, ground failure, or other natural hazard?		X				

1b. There may be some light compaction of soil due to equipment being driven over the fields during the mowing and haying portion and removal of old grass structures after their growing season and increased access to late summer rains for forbs in the fields without competition from cool season grasses would improve the vegetative community that the soil will support.

2. <u>AIR</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Emission of air pollutants or deterioration of ambient air quality? (Also see 13 (c).)			X		YES	2a
b. Creation of objectionable odors?		X				
c. Alteration of air movement, moisture, or temperature patterns or any change in climate, either locally or regionally?		X				
d. Adverse effects on vegetation, including crops,		X				

due to increased emissions of pollutants?						
e. For P-R/D-J projects, will the project result in any discharge, which will conflict with federal or state air quality regs? (Also see 2a.)		X				

2a. Air quality would be temporarily affected by exhaust of equipment in the immediate vicinity. All steps would be taken to conduct a quick and thorough haying to minimize prolonged affect.

3. <u>WATER</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Discharge into surface water or any alteration of surface water quality including but not limited to temperature, dissolved oxygen or turbidity?		X				
b. Changes in drainage patterns or the rate and amount of surface runoff?		X				
c. Alteration of the course or magnitude of floodwater or other flows?		X				
d. Changes in the amount of surface water in any water body or creation of a new water body?		X				
e. Exposure of people or property to water related hazards such as flooding?		X				
f. Changes in the quality of groundwater?		X				
g. Changes in the quantity of groundwater?		X				
h. Increase in risk of contamination of surface or groundwater?		X				
i. Effects on any existing water right or reservation?		X				
j. Effects on other water users as a result of any alteration in surface or groundwater quality?		X				
k. Effects on other users as a result of any alteration in surface or groundwater quantity?		X				
l. For P-R/D-J, will the project affect a designated floodplain? (Also see 3c.)		X				
m. For P-R/D-J, will the project result in any discharge that will affect federal or state water quality regulations? (Also see 3a.)		X				

	IMPACT
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4. VEGETATION	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
Will the proposed action result in?						
a. Changes in the diversity, productivity or abundance of plant species (including trees, shrubs, grass, crops, and aquatic plants)?			X			4a
b. Alteration of a plant community?		X				
c. Adverse effects on any unique, rare, threatened, or endangered species?		X				
d. Reduction in acreage or productivity of any agricultural land?		X				
e. Establishment or spread of noxious weeds?		X				
f. For P-R/D-J, will the project affect wetlands, or prime and unique farmland?		X				
g. Other:		X				

4a. There will be a change in abundance of vegetation for a short period until the following growing season. The remaining 66% of remaining DNC, created edge effect for increased use, as well as adjacent upland habitats will provide habitat for wildlife using the WMA.

5. FISH/WILDLIFE	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
Will the proposed action result in:						
a. Deterioration of critical fish or wildlife habitat?		X				5a
b. Changes in the diversity or abundance of game animals or bird species?			X			5b
c. Changes in the diversity or abundance of nongame species?			X			5b
d. Introduction of new species into an area?		X				
e. Creation of a barrier to the migration or movement of animals?		X				
f. Adverse effects on any unique, rare, threatened, or endangered species?		X				
g. Increase in conditions that stress wildlife populations or limit abundance (including harassment, legal or illegal harvest or other human activity)?			X			5g
h. For P-R/D-J, will the project be performed in any area in which T&E species are present, and will the project affect any T&E species or their habitat? (Also see 5f.)		X				
i. For P-R/D-J, will the project introduce or export any species not presently or historically occurring in the receiving location?		X				

5a. Temporary loss of vegetation will occur, but we anticipate/hope to have all management practices completed after the main nesting and brood rearing portion of the year (May 15 – July 1). The removal of some of the DNC will increase available forage habitat for broods which will be selecting for invertebrates in the open spaces. By

removing some of the DNC vegetation there could potentially be a short-term negative impact on certain avian species that utilize these fields for nesting. Since this proposal is for the removal of only 33% of the vegetative cover in the DNC fields which equates to roughly 43 acres in a WMA that is 398 acres in size and has grassland habitat that comprises approximately 86.5% of the area and we are impacting a small fraction of the habitat, wildlife will have other areas to disperse to in the short-term. Once the management practice is completed the area would provide a more healthy stand of DNC with some edges in growth structure, which provides a wider array of habitat that could attract a greater diversity of species and would provide additional nesting areas, hiding cover, thermal cover, and forage for grassland dependent species. The habitat will not deteriorate but will go through a transition of different types of habitat available and will result in enhanced habitat in the long-term.

- 5b. The removal of some of the old, decadent vegetation would increase the vigor of the stand and provide some edge effect that would create improve habitat for wildlife species that utilize these DNC fields through the year.
- 5g. Temporary displacement by species that have moved back into the area, but surrounding uplands within the WMA and other habitats will provide necessary cover until our activities are completed.

B. HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

6. <u>NOISE/ELECTRICAL EFFECTS</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Increases in existing noise levels?		X				
b. Exposure of people to serve or nuisance noise levels?		X				
c. Creation of electrostatic or electromagnetic effects that could be detrimental to human health or property?		X				
d. Interference with radio or television reception and operation?		X				

7. <u>LAND USE</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Alteration of or interference with the productivity or profitability of the existing land use of an area?		X				
b. Conflicted with a designated natural area or area of unusual scientific or educational importance?		X				
c. Conflict with any existing land use whose presence would constrain or potentially prohibit the proposed action?			X		Yes	7c
d. Adverse effects on or relocation of residences?		X				

7c. Cree Crossing WMA is open for public recreation year-round. Members of the public could potentially be using the site at the desired time of the proposed action. However, public use during haying season is low on Cree Crossing WMA. All steps would be taken to conduct a quick and thorough haying to minimize the amount of time the fields would be closed to the public.

IMPACT

8. <u>RISK/HEALTH HAZARDS</u>	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
Will the proposed action result in:						
a. Risk of an explosion or release of hazardous substances (including, but not limited to oil, pesticides, chemicals, or radiation) in the event of an accident or other forms of disruption?			X		YES	8a
b. Affect an existing emergency response or emergency evacuation plan, or create a need for a new plan?		X				
c. Creation of any human health hazard or potential hazard?		X				
d. For P-R/D-J, will any chemical toxicants be used? (Also see 8a)		X				

8a. The haying will utilize farm machinery and may lead to a small amount of diesel and gasoline being released during refueling. All precautionary measures would be taken to minimize any spills or leaks.

9. <u>COMMUNITY IMPACT</u>	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
Will the proposed action result in:						
a. Alteration of the location, distribution, density, or growth rate of the human population of an area?		X				
b. Alteration of the social structure of a community?		X				
c. Alteration of the level or distribution of employment or community or personal income?		X				
d. Changes in industrial or commercial activity?		X				
e. Increased traffic hazards or effects on existing transportation facilities or patterns of movement of people and goods?		X				

10. <u>PUBLIC SERVICES/TAXES/UTILITIES</u>	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
Will the proposed action result in:						
a. Will the proposed action have an effect upon or result in a need for new or altered governmental services in any of the following areas: fire or police protection, schools, parks/recreational facilities, roads or other public maintenance, water supply, sewer or septic systems, solid waste disposal, health, or other governmental services? If any, specify:		X				
b. Will the proposed action have an effect upon the local or state tax base and revenues?		X				
c. Will the proposed action result in a need for new facilities or substantial alterations of any of		X				

the following utilities: electric power, natural gas, other fuel supply or distribution systems, or communications?						
d. Will the proposed action result in increased use of any energy source?		X				
e. Define projected revenue sources		X				
f. Define projected maintenance costs.		X				

11. <u>AESTHETICS/RECREATION</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Alteration of any scenic vista or creation of an aesthetically offensive site or effect that is open to public view?			X			11a
b. Alteration of the aesthetic character of a community or neighborhood?			X			11a
c. Alteration of the quality or quantity of recreational/tourism opportunities and settings? (Attach Tourism Report.)		X				
d. For P-R/D-J, will any designated or proposed wild or scenic rivers, trails or wilderness areas be impacted? (Also see 11a, 11c.)		X				

11a. The hayed blocks may be unappealing to some individuals who prefer to see uniform grass stands, but would be temporary and growth in those blocks would fill in the next growing season.

12. <u>CULTURAL/HISTORICAL RESOURCES</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Destruction or alteration of any site, structure or object of prehistoric historic, or paleontological importance?		X				
b. Physical change that would affect unique cultural values?		X				
c. Effects on existing religious or sacred uses of a site or area?		X				
d. For P-R/D-J, will the project affect historic or cultural resources? Attach SHPO letter of clearance. (Also see 12.a.)		X				

C. SIGNIFICANCE CRITERIA

13. SUMMARY EVALUATION OF SIGNIFICANCE Will the proposed action, considered as a whole:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Have impacts that are individually limited, but cumulatively considerable? (A project or program may result in impacts on two or more separate resources that create a significant effect when considered together or in total.)		X				
b. Involve potential risks or adverse effects, which are uncertain but extremely hazardous if they were to occur?		X				
c. Potentially conflict with the substantive requirements of any local, state, or federal law, regulation, standard or formal plan?		X				
d. Establish a precedent or likelihood that future actions with significant environmental impacts will be proposed?		X				
e. Generate substantial debate or controversy about the nature of the impacts that would be created?		X				
f. For P-R/D-J, is the project expected to have organized opposition or generate substantial public controversy? (Also see 13e.)		X				
g. For P-R/D-J, list any federal or state permits required.		X				

2. Evaluation and listing of mitigation, stipulation, or other control measures enforceable by the agency or another government agency: None should be needed.

PART III. NARRATIVE EVALUATION AND COMMENT

The proposed prescriptive haying of a portion of the DNC fields would enhance the vigor and health of these grass stands while improving the habitat for the wildlife species that utilize this area throughout the year. The prescribed haying practice in blocks will also provide temporary edge effect for increased use by pheasants and other upland game birds and will allow forbs in these blocks a second growth to provide more forage for ungulates in the area.

Project activities are not expected to have significant impacts on the physical environment (i.e. land, air, water, vegetation and fish/wildlife resources) or the human environment (i.e. land use, aesthetics, community impact, cultural/historic resources, etc.). Impacts are expected to be minor at most and will generally be of short duration.

PART IV. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

1. Public involvement:

The public would be notified in the following manners to comment on this current EA, the proposed action and alternatives:

- Two public notices in each of these papers: Helena Independent Record, Phillips County News and The Glasgow Courier.
- One statewide press release;
- Public notice on the Fish, Wildlife & Parks web page: <http://fwp.mt.gov>.

Copies of this environmental assessment would be distributed to the neighboring landowners and interested parties to ensure their knowledge of the proposed project.

This level of public notice and participation is appropriate for a project of this scope having limited impacts, many of which can be mitigated.

2. Duration of comment period:

The public comment period will extend for (20) twenty days following the publication of the second legal notice in area newspapers. Written comments will be accepted until 5:00 p.m., March 15, 2021 and can be mailed to the address below:

Attn: Cree Crossing 2021 Haying Lease
MT Fish, Wildlife & Parks
1 Airport Road
Glasgow, MT 59230.

You can also email comments to stedrow@mt.gov. Hardcopies are available if requested by calling (406) 228-3700.

PART V. EA PREPARATION

- 1. Based on the significance criteria evaluated in this EA, is an EIS required? (YES/NO)? No**
If an EIS is not required, explain why the EA is the appropriate level of analysis for this proposed action.

An EIS is not deemed to be required for the proposed action. An EA is deemed to be the appropriate level of analysis given the overall size and scope of the project. In addition, overall negative impacts are expected to be minimal at the most. The proposed project also has support from interested sportsmen.

2. Person(s) responsible for preparing the EA:

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APPENDICES: Map of location.

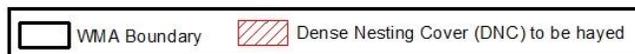


Figure 1. Location map of Dense Nesting Cover fields within Cree Crossing Wildlife Management Area for proposed habitat enhancement.